

Date: Feb 20, 2011; Section: Opinion; Page: B2

AMERICAN PRESS EDITORIAL

Express opinions on redistricting

Southwest Louisiana residents can voice their views on state redistricting plans when a joint legislative committee comes to town Tuesday.

Members of the Senate and House Governmental Affairs Committee will meet at 10 a.m. in the Lake Charles Civic Center's Buccaneer Room to gather local input regarding the redistricting process.

The meeting is one of nine the committee is holding throughout the state.

The Legislature will convene March 20 to hammer out congressional, state legislative, Public Service Commission, Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, Court of Appeal and Supreme Court districts.

"All Louisiana citizens have a vital interest in our redistricting process and in the election districts for elected offices in Louisiana," said state Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, chairman of the House Governmental Affairs Committee. "Now is the time for the public's opinions and voices to be heard concerning the makeup of these districts."

For area residents, the key issue is the redrawing of congressional districts necessitated by the state's loss of one congressman because of slow population growth over the past 10 years.

Several plans have been floated from groups with various interests.

The majority of U.S. congressmen from Louisiana favor a plan that retains two north Louisiana congressional districts and extends the current 7th Congressional District, which now covers Calcasieu, Cameron and Jeff Davis parishes, as far east as Terrebonne Parish.

Our issue with this plan is that it removes Jeff Davis Parish and places it in what is now the 4th Congressional District, currently represented by U.S. Rep. Jim McCrery of Shreveport.

Another plan being touted by newly elected 3rd District Congressman Jeff Landry and local government officials in southeastern Louisiana would create a single coastal district that would stretch from Venice to the Louisiana-Texas border.

That plan would further fracture Southwest Louisiana's current congressional district. Cameron Parish would be the lone Southwest Louisiana parish in that district. Calcasieu and Beauregard parishes would be moved to a northwestern district that would stretch to the Arkansas border. Jeff Davis and Allen parishes would be shifted to a massive district that would run all the way to the northeastern corner of the state.

Advocates of that plan are pushing the notion that one coastal congressional district would provide a single voice in the House for coastal and wetlands restoration. That notion is, at best, self-serving and, at worst, idiotic.

The plight of Louisiana's coast is such that it needs multiple voices in Congress calling for federal help in arresting erosion and repairing decades of damage.

Another idea Gallot said might make sense, but has yet to garner support from political powers, would be a single north Louisiana district that might dip as far south as Alexandria. That, in turn, could mean an L-shaped congressional district that would encompass most, if not all, of Southwest Louisiana and flow eastward to beyond Lafayette.

With politics wafting through all redistricting discussions, it's vital that residents of this corner of the state air their opinions to the committee.

It's similar to the old warning about voting: if you don't participate, don't complain about the results.